

JOSEPH DELANEY

SPOOKS

ALICE

*Will old enemies
take their deadly
revenge?*

FROM THE
SERIES THAT
INSPIRED THE MOVIE
**SEVENTH
SON**
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About the Author

Also by Joseph Delaney

Sneak Preview

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About the Book

'A lot of dark stuff happened when I was young that I've never even told to my dearest friend, Tom Ward. Dark and scary things that I hoped I had left behind for ever . . .'

Over the years, Alice has fought side by side with the Spook and his apprentice, Thomas Ward. But now Alice is alone - in the realm of the dark. And the creatures she has helped to banish there, now have the chance to take their revenge.

Alice must seek the final weapon to destroy the Fiend. If she fails, the world will fall into despair and darkness. If she succeeds, it means facing her death at the hands of her dearest friend. But can she prevent the darkness from overtaking her completely . . . ?

The penultimate instalment of the Wardstone Chronicles follows Alice, Thomas Ward's loyal companion, to the most terrifying place of all.

SPOOKS

ALICE



JOSEPH DELANEY

Interior illustrations by David Wyatt

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CHARACTER PROFILES

ALICE

Alice is related to two of the most evil witch clans (the Malkins and the Deanes) and was trained as a witch against her will. Whilst she was born of a union between malevolent witch Bony Lizzie and the Fiend himself, Alice counts herself as an ally of the light, and for years she has fought alongside The Spook and his apprentice, Tom Ward. In her battles she has increasingly been forced to rely on dark magic to save her friends, and she fears that every time she does will draw her closer and closer to the dark.

BONY LIZZIE

Bony Lizzie was a powerful witch who murdered children and used their bones in dark rituals. For two years she trained Alice to become a malevolent witch. After freeing her grandmother, Mother Malkin, from a pit in the garden at Chipenden, Lizzie found herself bound by the Spook in the exact same pit. She subsequently escaped and was briefly able to establish rule over the Isle of Mona, but she later died there after the bird witch Adriana summoned a flock of seagulls to peck her to death.

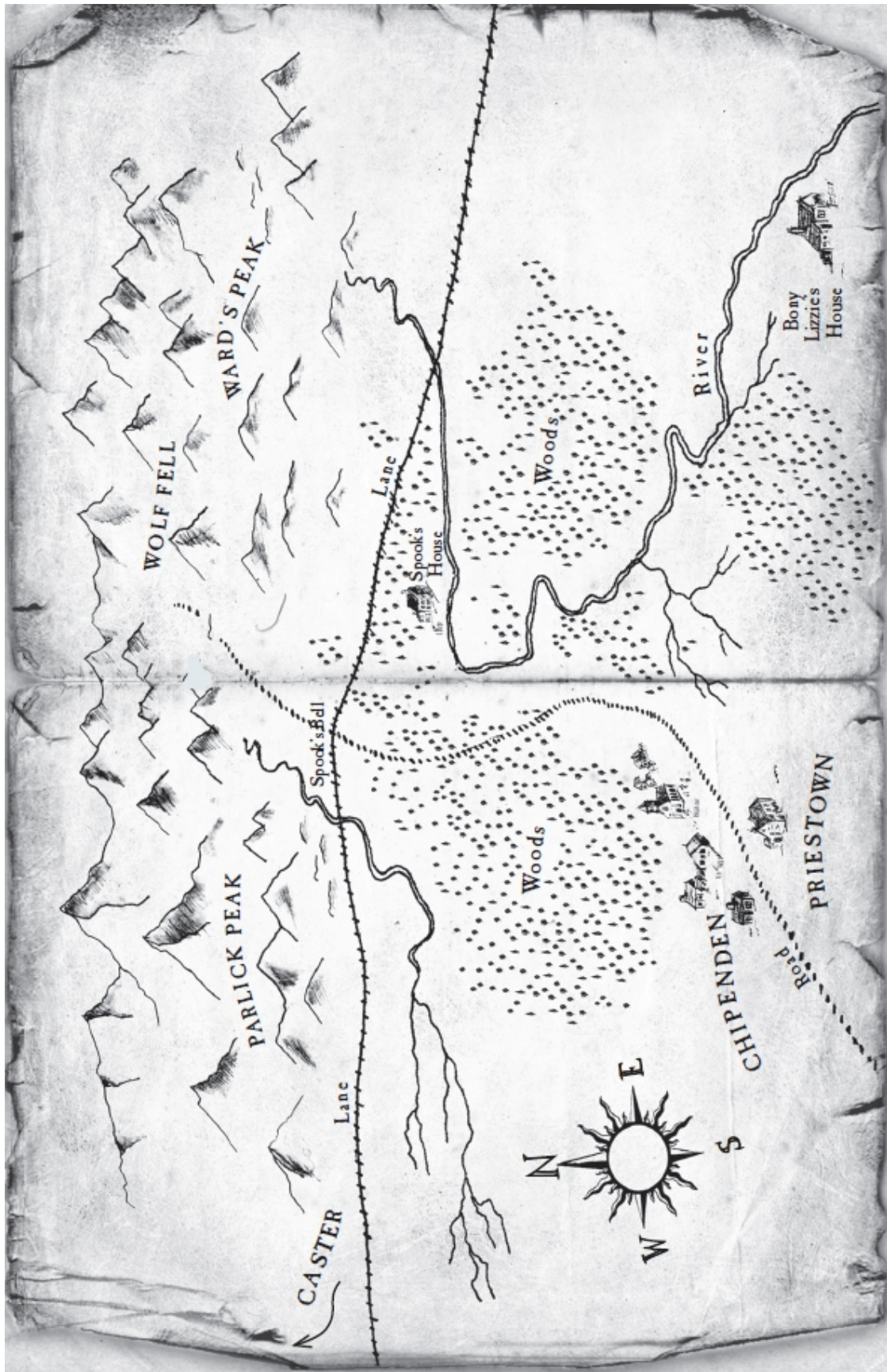
GRIMALKIN

Grimalkin is the current assassin of the Malkin witch clan. Very fast and strong, she has a code of honour and rarely resorts to trickery. Although honourable, Grimalkin also has a dark side and is reputed to use torture. Recently she has forged an unlikely alliance with Tom Ward against their common enemy, the Fiend. But can a true servant of the dark ever really be trusted?

THE FIEND

The Fiend is the dark made flesh, the most powerful of all its denizens and the very oldest of the old Gods. He has many other names, including the Devil, Satan, Lucifer and the Father of Lies. Together, Tom Ward and his allies managed to sever the Fiend's head in battle, but their fight to destroy him once and for all had only just begun . . .





Hell has many names.
Some call it the Underworld,
Others Hades or the Abyss.
We witches simply call it 'the *dark*'.
It is our beginning and our end.

THE DESTRUCTION OF the Fiend may be achieved by the following means. Firstly the three sacred objects must be to hand. They are the hero swords forged by Hephaestus. The greatest of these is the Destiny Blade; the second is the dagger called Bone Cutter, which will be given to you by Slake. The third is the dagger named Dolorous, sometimes called the Blade of Sorrow, which you must retrieve from the dark.

The place is also important: it must be one especially conducive to the use of magic. Thus the ritual must be carried out on a high hill east of Caster, which is known as the Wardstone.

The blood sacrifice should be made in this precise manner. A fire must be constructed - one capable of generating great heat. To achieve this it will be necessary to build a forge.

Throughout the ritual the willing sacrificial victim must display great courage. If she once cries out to betray her pain, all will be lost and the rite will fail.

Using the dagger Bone Cutter, the thumb-bones must be taken from the right hand and cast into the flames. Only if she does not cry out may the second cut be made to remove the bones of the left hand. These also are added to the fire.

Next, using the dagger Dolorous, the heart must be cut out of the victim and, still beating, cast into the flames.

CHAPTER
I
A PRICE TO PAY



I WAS BEING trained as a witch, wasn't I, when I first met Tom Ward, the Spook's apprentice. We should have been enemies, but after a very uncertain start we ended up friends. I helped him and fought the dark by his side, and it was during that time that I learned a terrible truth about myself - I was one of the Fiend's daughters, and Bony Lizzie was actually my mother.

But I carried on helping Tom and Old Gregory, the Spook. Despite my background I couldn't let myself go over to the dark. We fought the Fiend together, with the help of Grimalkin, the witch assassin, and eventually we dealt him a terrible blow: we chopped off his head and bound his body with silver spears so that he was trapped within his dead flesh.

Knowing that his servants would pursue us relentlessly, Grimalkin went on the run with the Fiend's head wrapped in a leather bag, fighting any creature she encountered. It would only be a matter of time before she was caught, I was sure - not even the powerful witch assassin could defeat so many dark entities. Once they killed Grimalkin and retrieved the head, they would take it back to Ireland and reunite it with the rest of the Fiend's body; then he

would be set loose in the world once more and a new age of darkness and terror would begin.

There is just one chance to stop him - just one way to destroy him for ever. My friend Tom Ward has to complete a sacrificial ritual at midnight next Halloween, now less than four months away. It involves the use of three blades known as the hero swords. Tom already has two of these weapons in his possession, but the third is located in the dark, and it is up to me to retrieve it.

The details of the ritual had been communicated to him by his own mother, who was the first and most powerful of all the lamias. She'd died in Greece fighting the Ordeen, one of the Old Gods, but her spirit was still very strong and she had been trying to aid us in our attempt to deal with the Fiend.

But there was something about the ritual that Tom had withheld from me. Something that I'd had to find out for myself . . .

It involved a sacrifice. There had to be a 'willing sacrificial victim'. Someone had to die.

Tom had to sacrifice the person he loved most of all.

That someone was me.

So I am off to the dark to find the dagger called Dolorous - the blade that will eventually be used to kill me.

Just one thing worse than the dark, ain't there? And that's what's inside it - the things that call it home . . .

Lots of my enemies were in there - supporters of the Fiend. So I cloaked myself using the most powerful magic I had. I wasn't sure it would be enough. The dark is where magic comes from, and it's the dwelling place of the Old Gods. And I was alone.

I'd been there once before - snatched away by the Fiend. Each of the Old Gods has a home in the dark - a territory, a personal domain that belongs only to them - and there was

one god who'd helped me. Brought me back to the world, he had. Pan, like some of the others, wants to be left alone - completely alone - and doesn't take kindly to intruders. If I found a way into Pan's domain, none of my enemies would be waiting for me there. Course, that didn't guarantee that he wouldn't destroy me for invading his space.

Pan has two aspects, two different forms. One, which I hoped I would never see, is terrible - most folk would be driven mad just by gazing into his face; the other form was the one I hoped I'd be able to talk to.

To get into Pan's domain with my powerful magic should be relatively easy. He mostly dwells in the dark, but he's also the god of nature. His home is never that far from our world.

Anyone who's been alone in a forest has sensed his presence. There are times when everything becomes still and silent; everything that *can* breathe seems to be holding its breath. There are no rustles in the undergrowth; no breeze; just a sense of a gigantic unseen presence.

Which means that Pan is close.

So I chose a forested area south-east of Chipenden, not too far from the river Ribble. If I *did* manage to get back safely with the dagger, I wouldn't have far to go to find Tom Ward again.

I selected a lonely spot, sat in the long grass and made myself comfortable with my back against a tree. I was scared, my whole body trembling, so I took long, slow, deep breaths to calm myself. Then I waited for the conditions to become right.

It happened very close to dusk.

Everything became still and quiet, just as I knew it would. Pan was nearby. It was as if he were just behind a curtain, so close I could have touched him.

I used my magic and tried to enter his domain. It was much more difficult than I expected - it took me a long time

to find a way in. It was like searching for a tiny lock in a big door with my eyes blindfolded. It was difficult to locate, and it resisted my attempts for so long that I thought I was sure to fail. Then, very suddenly, I was in, and a mixture of feelings raced through me: elation at my success; nervousness at entering Pan's domain; and a touch of fear.

I was standing close to a lake that was gleaming bright green. Above, the sky was dark so I knew it wasn't reflected light. *Everything* around me was glowing with that same green - even the tree trunks. Green is the colour of Nature. Green is the colour of Pan.

At the river margin were tall reeds, and beyond them, on the far bank, thin ash saplings, but all was absolutely still. Nothing moved but my chest, which was rising and falling rapidly. I took three deep breaths, trying to slow down my heart.

I had to stay calm.

Just beyond the saplings was the edge of a forest - tall deciduous trees of a type I didn't recognize. They were covered in blossoms that suggested early spring - but rather than being pink or white, they were green too.

It was as if the forest were alive and listening to my fluttery breaths and the *thumpety-bump* of my heart. The word 'panic' comes from Pan's name; they say that if he appears in his terrible form, a strong sense of dread is experienced at his approach. Few have lived to tell the tale.

Was he approaching in that aspect now? If so, I wasn't feeling the dread.

At that moment I heard high, thin musical notes in the distance. Could it be Pan in his more benign form, playing his reed pipes?

I could only hope for the best.

So I circled the green lake, pushed my way through the thicket of saplings and entered the forest. I hurried towards the sound of the music and came to a wide

clearing that was thick with ferns. At its centre they had been flattened by many creatures: hares, rabbits, rats, mice, voles, a couple of badgers and a bushy-tailed red fox, while above, the branches were laden with birds. All were silent and still, held in thrall to the source of that exquisite music.

Looking like a young, pale-faced, fair-haired boy, Pan was sitting on a log playing a reed pipe, just as I remembered him. His clothes seemed to be made out of grass, leaves and bark. The face appeared human, but the ears that poked out through his long unkempt hair were elongated and pointy. I also noticed the green toenails of his bare feet. They were so long that each curled upwards into a spiral.

The Old God looked at me and stopped playing. Immediately the spell of the music was broken, and the creatures of the forest fled, while the birds soared up into the sky, making the branches overhead dance. Moments later we were alone.

He glared at me and his face began to distort into something fierce and bestial. I felt a cold dread wash over me. In seconds the boy would be gone and I would face his other terrible aspect.

‘Please! Please!’ I cried. ‘I’m Alice. Remember me? You helped me once before. Please listen to me. Didn’t mean to cause any offence, did I?’

To my relief, the change stopped and slowly reversed until I was looking at the boy once more – though his face looked very serious, without even a hint of a smile. Then it flickered with anger.

‘You assume too much,’ he snarled. ‘Tell me why I shouldn’t strike you dead on the spot.’

‘Don’t mean no harm,’ I told him. ‘Sorry to intrude without permission. Helped me once before, you did, and I’m really grateful for that. And now I need your help again. I have to fetch something from the dark, and this is the

safest place I could think of to enter. Got lots of enemies here, I have. But I know they won't dare come here because of you.'

'But *you* dared! And there is a price to pay for such presumption.'

'I'll pay whatever you want,' I told him, 'as long as you don't take away my life. I ain't afraid to die - we all got to go sometime - but I need to give it to someone else. My life has to be sacrificed. Help me, please. I have to find a blade that's hidden under the Fiend's throne. Just guide me to the edge of his domain and let me escape back this way afterwards . . . That's all I ask.'

Pan looked intrigued. 'And why is the recovery of this blade so important?'

I had learned that I was to be the sacrifice by scrying, but later, when Tom Ward lay unconscious, recovering from his battle with Siscoi, the vampire god, I'd taken the letter from his pocket and read it several times, so that I'd remember it. I saw no reason why I shouldn't now tell the god. After all, he already knew how we'd bound the Fiend. It was that weakening of the Fiend's power which had made it possible for Pan to return me to the world above.

'We need three sacred objects for the ritual that'll destroy the Fiend for all time - the hero swords forged by the old blacksmith god. They must be present when Tom Ward carries it out.'

'These blades are known to me,' said Pan. 'And they have brought much misery and suffering to humans. Which one is hidden here in the dark?'

'Tom already has the Destiny Blade and Bone Cutter. The one I'm here to find is the one called Dolorous,' I told him.

'Ah, but the Blade of Sorrow is by far the worst of the three. It would be better for humankind if it were not returned to your world.'

'But by using it we can destroy our worst enemy.'

Pan slowly shook his head and regarded me with an expression of extreme pity. 'Foolish human - don't you see what will happen? You may be able to destroy the Fiend, but you cannot destroy the dark, for it will always find a way to achieve balance with the light. End the present situation and a new equilibrium will develop. Destroy the dark's most powerful entity, and another will eventually grow in power and replace it.'

These were not words I wanted to hear. Did it mean I was going to sacrifice my life for nothing? But that was for the long-term; it was the situation *now* we had to deal with. What happened in the distant future seemed less important.

'If that happens, it happens, and I can't do nothing about it, can I? But we have already attacked the Fiend and hurt him badly. If he recovers and returns to his former power, his revenge will be terrible. Ain't just talking about me, Tom and Old Gregory - the whole world will suffer. So we got to stop him somehow. And the ritual has to be carried out this coming Halloween or it will be too late.'

Pan stared at me for a long time and my knees began to tremble. I had strong magic at my disposal, and for a moment I thought about using it, but I knew that I had no chance against one of the Old Gods in the heart of his territory. He might kill me on the spot, and all I'd done would have been for nothing.

Then he gave me a quick nod. 'Tell me more about the ritual,' he commanded.

'It has to be done on a special hill in the County called the Wardstone. A forge has to be built there,' I explained. 'The victim must not cry out, no matter how terrible the pain. The dagger called Bone Cutter is well named - that is the blade that will cut the thumb-bones from her. If she cries out when the bones of her right hand are cut away, the sacrifice fails. After the bones have been thrown into

the fire, a second cut does the same to the left hand. The other dagger, the one I've come to get, is then used to cut out the victim's heart, which is cast, still beating, into the flames.'

'You say the "sacrifice", the "thumb-bones" and the "victim's heart" as if they belong to somebody else. But this terrible thing will be done to *you*! Do you not know this?' Pan asked me.

I nodded and, unable to meet his fierce gaze, lowered my eyes. 'Of course I know. Detaching my mind from it is the only way I can deal with it . . .'

'Do you think when it comes to the sacrifice that you will be able to endure the pain? When they cut the bones from your hand, your body may disobey you and cry out anyway. To be human is to be weak - for you creatures some things are simply impossible to bear.'

'Just do my best - that's all anybody can do, ain't it?'

Pan nodded, and for the first time he didn't look quite so angry. When he replied, his voice was gentler.

'You may be foolish, human, but you are also brave. I will escort you across my land and start you on the next stage of your journey.'

We travelled in silence, Pan about five paces ahead, striding out through the trees. All was still and our journey seemed endless, for it was difficult to judge the passing of time in the dark. And that was a worry.

From my last visit I knew that time behaved differently here: it seemed as if I'd spent long years as a prisoner of the Fiend, but on my return to earth I found it had been mere weeks. I knew the reverse could happen too. For all I knew, time might be passing more rapidly back in the County, where now only four months remained before Halloween. Even if I did succeed in retrieving the dagger, it might be too late.

The forest was beginning to thin out now, the large ancient trees giving way to saplings and scrub. Directly ahead I could see what appeared to be a vast, featureless plain divided by a path that began just beyond the final tree. Beyond the green glow from the forest the land was dark – but for this narrow path, which was formed of tiny white stones.

‘I must leave you now,’ Pan said. ‘Follow the white path across the abyss that lies between each domain. It will take you into the next one.’

‘Into the territory of the Fiend?’ I asked.

Pan shook his head. ‘Who can say? The domains of the dark constantly shift and change in relation to each other. Nothing stays the same for long. But if you can eventually find your way back here, I will help you return to your own world. But you entered my domain without an invitation, so remember that before doing so I will demand that you pay the price of your presumption.’

I stared at the path for a moment longer, and when I turned back to ask Pan what the price was, he had already gone.

I was standing still, but the green trees were receding. As I watched, the forest quickly shrank until it was no larger than the moon back on earth. A moment later it was no bigger than a star, and then it vanished completely. Had it grown smaller or had it simply moved further away? It was impossible to tell.

I was alone, and now all around me was darkness. I sniffed three times, checking for danger. All seemed well, so I stepped onto the path and began to walk, the stones crunching loudly with each cautious step of my pointy shoes. It was perfectly straight, becoming fainter and fainter until, in the distance, it appeared to be no more than a fine line. Only the white stones were visible. I began to walk faster, striding on.

Again it was hard to judge the passage of time, and I don't know how long I'd been walking when I heard a distant howl somewhere to my left. It sounded like the hunting cry of a wolf or some other large predator.

Suddenly nervous, I increased my pace a little, listening out. I became aware of the loud crunching of my shoes on the pebble path. If it was some sort of wolf and it hadn't sniffed my scent already, surely the sound of my footsteps would bring it in my direction? I decided to walk alongside the path rather than on it.

But when I tried to step off, my left shoe encountered no resistance. There was nothing there. No ground.

Pan had said that an abyss lay between each of the zones! And what was an abyss other than a great emptiness, a bottomless pit?

Pitching forward into the darkness, I twisted desperately and managed to fall sideways, back onto the path. Then, my heart hammering after that close call, I knelt and looked down. I could see nothing. On all sides was absolute darkness. With my left hand I reached down, but could feel nothing. What could I do but continue on my way, keeping to the path?

My heart steadying to a normal rhythm, I crunched along, trying to work out the most likely explanation for what had happened. Either the ground had just disappeared or the path had somehow climbed upwards - in which case, what was supporting it?

The hunting cry came again. This time it was much nearer but it came from below. So I *had* left the ground behind. I was safe from the creature for now - unless it could somehow find its way up onto the path.

Soon I heard the howl once more - higher and nearer - and I immediately became more nervous. Was it already up on the path?

I walked even faster, wondering what manner of creature was behind me. Was I being hunted? Was it some sort of daemon?

I glanced back, and in the distance I could see something loping towards me on all fours. It looked like a small dog, but that might be because it was still a considerable distance behind me. I really had no idea how big it was. I began to run. It was difficult to get up much speed on the stones, and I slipped and almost fell headlong.

Risking another glance back, I immediately wished I hadn't. What was following me now looked very big, more wolf than dog, and it was gaining by the second. There was something strange about the creature's face. Yes, it had the bestial face of a wolf, but its expression was sly, crafty and almost human.

A chill ran the length of my spine as, suddenly, I knew exactly what pursued me.

It was the kretch, the creature that had been created by witches to hunt down and slay Grimalkin as she carried the Fiend's head. Fathered by a daemon called Tanaki, it had great powers of regeneration and had grown steadily stronger, learning from each encounter with the witch assassin. One of its weapons was a deadly poison that had weakened Grimalkin; only with the help of my magic had she finally been able to kill it.

Now it had a new existence in the dark.

And I was its target. I had hoped to sneak into the dark unseen but for Pan. What a fool I'd been! Things were watchful here, and this creature had found me already.

I didn't want to use my magic: it was a finite resource and I might have need of it later. Not only that . . . Each use of dark magic brought me nearer to being a fully-fledged malevolent witch with a cruel heart of stone. This is what worried me most.

But here I had no choice. I decided to be economical with my power and use the minimum. I exerted my will, and a thick mist began to form across the path so that I could no longer see the kretch. I added to that a spell of bewilderment.

I didn't know how effective this would be against such a creature, but within seconds it howled again - no longer the triumphant cruel cry of a hunter; more of a baffled whine.

There was no knowing how long it would remain lost and befuddled, so I began to run again, until the mist and the kretch were far behind.

Soon I'd something else to worry about, though. I realized that, in the distance, I could see the end of the path. The white line of stones simply stopped, and beyond it lay nothing but darkness.

What if I had become trapped in the space between zones? Did the path start and end with nothingness? I wondered. A dark rocky cliff lay directly ahead, and I saw that the white path didn't end after all; it simply disappeared into the mouth of a small cave.

Was this the entrance to the next domain?

A yellow light shone just inside. Unless I was mistaken, it was the flickering light of a candle. Who did it belong to? Cautiously I approached the entrance and halted, peering within.

A pair of vivid sapphire-blue eyes stared back at me. I saw a girl of about my own age. Her black hair was cut short and she had a small tattoo on her left cheek - that of a bear. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor, holding up her hands towards me. She had been maimed - they were dripping with blood, and the cause was terrible. Where her thumbs should have been there were two gaping wounds.

'You must be Alice,' she said. 'My name is Thorne.'

CHAPTER 2 THE KRETCH



THORNE WAS THE girl Grimalkin had trained as a witch assassin. We had never met; she had been kept a secret from most people, but I knew all about her, especially how she had died. She had been slain by the servants of the Fiend on the edge of Witch Dell. They had sliced off her thumbs while she still lived, and the shock and loss of blood had killed her.

The eyes that now regarded me with such seriousness were surprisingly gentle. But the lithe body crisscrossed with leather straps containing an assortment of blades marked her as a warrior.

‘Do you know that you’re being followed?’ she asked.

‘Yes. I think it’s the kretch,’ I replied. ‘I used magic to keep it at bay but it won’t hold it for very long.’

That was true. It was beyond death now. How could it be stopped?

As if the creature knew we were discussing it, there came another howl from the darkness, once again a hunting cry; it sounded very close.

‘We must hurry!’ Thorne rose to her feet. ‘Take the candle and follow me!’

I looked beyond her and saw that the cave opened up into a tunnel.

Thorne turned towards it, and I snatched up the candle and jogged after her.

Sometimes the tunnel was so low that we were forced to bow our heads even when crawling on all fours. In one way that made me feel better - for how could the kretch hope to squeeze through such a confined space? But then we would briefly emerge into caverns so vast that the candle could not illuminate the roof. There were ledges far above us, and I sensed malevolent, hostile eyes peering down at us.

'Whose domain is this?' I asked, shocked as my voice echoed to fill such vastness.

At my question, Thorne came to a sudden halt and turned to face me, putting her forefinger vertically to her lips to indicate the need for silence. Blood was still dripping from her mutilated hands.

'We are still in the place between domains, but sometimes the white path gives way to tunnels that are somewhat safer - too small to accommodate anything really big and dangerous.'

'How big is the kretch, then? Grimalkin told me it was the size of a small horse. Can it follow us here?'

'It can and will,' Thorne answered. 'The laws of size, matter and distance are very different to those back on earth. It might well be catching us now. But there are worse things than its size. It was fathered by Tanaki, one of the hidden daemons that dwell in the abyss. He too may come after us, but fortunately he truly is too large to enter this system of tunnels.'

'Were you waiting for me?' I asked her.

Thorne nodded. 'You have friends here as well as enemies. I will do what I can to help. But why have you come? The living should not enter the dark.'

For a moment I hesitated. Could I trust Thorne? I asked myself. But then I remembered how positively Grimalkin had spoken about her. I had never heard the witch assassin speak of another with such warmth. Also, I had been alone in the dark and had not expected to be helped. My chances of success would be much greater with a brave ally such as Thorne alongside me.

'I need to find the domain of the Fiend,' I told her. 'There's a dagger under his throne. It can be used as part of a special ritual to finish him off. But what about you, Thorne? How did you know when I would arrive and where to find me?'

'We'll talk later, and I'll tell you some of what I know of the dark,' Thorne said. 'There's a lot for you to learn, but now we need to reach the next domain. With luck it will be the Fiend's - then you can get what you need and leave this place.'

I would have liked an answer to my question; however, although I had spent time in the dark, it had been as a prisoner; Thorne had survived here. So, for now, it seemed best to accept that she knew more than I did and allow her to lead.

Soon we came to the end of the tunnel system, and the white path once more stretched out into the darkness above the abyss. It looked identical to what we had left behind. For all I knew, we had somehow come about in a circle and returned to the point where I'd first entered the cave.

Thorne led the way onto the path, so I blew out the candle and pushed it into the pocket of my skirt. 'How long before we reach the next domain?' I asked.

She shrugged. 'Everything shifts and moves here. It's impossible to say. I've not been in the dark very long. There are many who are much better at getting about, especially